

Power, Judgment and Political Evil

**In Conversation with
Hannah Arendt**

Edited by
**Andrew Schaap
Danielle Celermajer
Vrasidas Karalis**

POWER, JUDGMENT AND POLITICAL EVIL

Rethinking Political and International Theory

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In Conversation with Hannah Arendt

Edited by

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Andrew Schaap is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Exeter. His interests include radical democracy, transitional justice, reconciliation and the politics

of human rights. He is author of *Political Reconciliation* (2005) and editor of *Law and Agonistic Politics* (2009). His current research examines how Arendt's aporetic conception of the right to have rights has been taken up by a range of contemporary thinkers, including Jacques Rancière and Giorgio Agamben.

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List of Abbreviations

- BPF Arendt, H. 1968. *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin.
- CR Arendt, H. 1972. *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- DTB Arendt, H. 2002. *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, edited by U. Ludz and I. Nordmann. Munich: Piper.
- EJ Arendt, H. 1965. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. New York: Viking Press.
- EU Arendt, H. 1994. *Essays in Understanding, 1930-54*, edited by J. Kohn. New York: Harcourt Brace and Co.
- HC Arendt, H. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- JP Arendt, H. 1978. *The Jew as Pariah*, edited by R. Feldman. New York: Grove Press.
- LA Arendt, H. 1996. *Love and St Augustine*, edited by J.V. Scott and J.C. Stark. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LKPP Arendt, H. 1982. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edited by R. Beiner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LMT Arendt, H. 1978. *The Life of the Mind I: Thinking*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- LMW Arendt, H. 1978. *The Life of the Mind II: Willing*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- JW Arendt, H. 2007. *The Jewish Writings*, edited by J. Kohn and R. Feldman. New York: Schocken Books.
- MDT Arendt, H. 1968. *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- OR Arendt, H. 1965. *On Revolution*, 2nd Edition. New York: Viking Press.
- OT Arendt, H. 1973. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- OV Arendt, H. 1969. *On Violence*. New York: Harvest Books.
- PP Arendt, H. 2005. *The Promise of Politics*, edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- RJ Arendt, H. 2003. *Responsibility and Judgment*, edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- RLC Arendt, H. 2007. *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, edited by S. Young-Ah Gottlieb. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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Introduction: In Conversation with Hannah Arendt

Danielle Celermajer, Andrew Schaap and Vrasidas Karalis

On 28 October 1964 Hannah Arendt was interviewed by Günter Gaus for West German television. The interview took place towards the end of the controversy that had raged over her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Her report on the ‘banality of evil’ had first appeared as a series of articles in the *New Yorker* in February–March 1963.¹ Gershom Scholem had criticized her report for the ‘heartless, frequently almost sneering and malicious tone’ in which she discussed the actions of the Jewish councils in Europe under the Nazis. ‘In you, dear Hannah’, he wrote, ‘I find little trace’ of ‘*Ahabath Israel*: love of the Jewish people’ (JP, 241). Arendt’s reply, which was published together with Scholem’s letter in *Encounter* in January 1964, included an unusual public reflection on the relation of her personal life to her political thought.²

Günter Gaus bases his questions on Arendt’s letter to Scholem. In her reply to Scholem, Arendt confesses that she had no interest in politics or history in her youth (JP, 245–246). Gaus asks whether a specific event prompted Arendt’s ‘turn to the political’ (EU, 4). Arendt insists that her Jewishness was ‘one of the indisputable factual data’ of her life that she had never wanted to change (JP, 246). Gaus wants to know whether she had a feeling of being ‘something special’ as a Jew in Weimar Germany (EU, 7). Arendt declares that she had ‘never in [her] life “loved” any people or collective group’ but only her friends (JP, 246). Gaus inquires whether such an attitude risks being ‘politically sterile’ if political action requires group solidarity based on a certain kind of love (EU, 16). By taking Arendt’s earlier reflections about the relation between her personal life and her political ideas as his starting point, Gaus is able to elicit from Arendt a remarkable series of responses concerning the nature of power, judgment and political evil.

In the interview (which was awarded the Adolf Grimme prize), Arendt, aged 58, appears as a charismatic public intellectual, smoking cigarettes as she engages in conversation with Gaus on a darkly lit stage. About the interview, Karl

1 Gaus mentions that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was first published in German around the time of the interview (EU, 15).

2 Just two months before the interview, on 6 August 1964, Arendt had intervened in the Eichmann controversy in a public address for the BBC radio programme, *The Listener*, which was broadcast in America and the UK, and published as ‘Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship’ (RJ, 17–48).

Jaspers wrote to Arendt: 'Who else has this openness that you dare display? Your spontaneity – the fine nuances of your impromptu observations – no one will be able to say that that is not absolutely genuine' (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 565; 4 October 1964). To which Arendt replied, 'I'm relieved that you liked it. I had the feeling that I spoke too spontaneously, because I like Gaus a lot' (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 568; 25 October 1964). This spontaneity was central to Arendt's act of self-disclosure as she engaged with Gaus in public dialogue. As Connell and Kowal (1998, 553) discuss, however, much of this 'spontaneity is lost in the translation [of the interview] from orality to literacy': between Arendt's public performance captured on film and the reification of speech in the text published in *Essays in Understanding*.³

For instance, when watching the interview one is struck by both the patience and confidence with which Arendt corrects Gaus's introduction, refuting the terms of the first question he puts to her: 'I am afraid I have to protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers...' (EU, 1). Gaus had asked Arendt how she feels about being a female philosopher and before he knows it, he is drawn into conversation about the relation between politics and philosophy. While insisting she is not a philosopher, though, Arendt suggests wryly that 'it is entirely possible that a woman will one day be a philosopher'. Gaus objects, 'I consider you to be a philosopher!' Arendt's smiling response ('Well, I can't help that') is perfectly timed, eliciting laughter from the viewer (EU, 2).

Arendt appears good-humoured but formidable. Later in the interview, having discussed Arendt's life in Germany and then France, Gaus shifts focus: 'Then during the Second World War you went to the United States of America, where you are now professor of political theory, not philosophy...' and Arendt interrupts with 'Thank you!', chuckling (as Gaus continues, '...in Chicago') to the further amusement of the viewer.⁴ Also lost in translation from speech to writing is Arendt's ironic use of an English expression when, in an effort to explain why her

3 Note that Jaspers observations of 4 October, cited above and by Connell and Kowal (1998, 553), were based on a transcript he read prior to viewing the interview. Surprisingly, he did not like the telecast itself, writing to Arendt the day after it was shown on television: 'Yesterday evening we saw you in the interview with Gaus...The content brought no surprises because I knew it well from your manuscript. But I had pictured the television presentation differently. It was not good: always different camera angles, which were distracting; your face in extreme close-ups, which were annoying because one could see your neck muscles twitch sometimes, as in an anatomical demonstration, again a distraction – and barbaric. The fact that Gaus was never visible made matters even worse. And then the glaring whiteness of face and arms, which seems to be the norm in television. But despite all this your facial expression was sometimes, as I've become accustomed to see it over the years, magnificent, sometimes tense and somewhat nervous. The spontaneity was genuine and therefore credible' (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 572; 29 October 1964).

4 Jaspers later wrote to Arendt: 'Your farewell to philosophy is a joke, however serious your declaration of it was...It's good that you're being instantly punished by your students for making that comment. Your students are demanding philosophy of you and are of course

mother-tongue is so important to her, she tells how the many German poems she knows by heart are somehow always ‘at the back of my mind’ (EU, 13). Moreover, as Khristina Hadda observes:

What the reader [also] cannot hear is the extent to which Arendt is an ascendant master of the German language. Her speaking brings clarity, order and urgency to thought. In German, idiomatic speech and poetic resonance are hardwired into the pathways of her thinking. She speaks clearly, slowly; she articulates well and has excellent timing. Some of her formulations, even in an informal interview, are stunning and publication quality. There is something proud in this command of language that coincides with the command of thought. Arendt’s voice conveys a strong moral authority without hype or overstatement. There is no awkwardness. Her clear-cut sentences are punctuated not only by their structure but by her sharp pronunciation of words. (Haddad 2008, 2)

When Gaus eventually draws the conversation round to the recent controversy concerning her Eichmann book, Arendt can barely constrain her irritation. She shifts uncomfortably in her seat, gesturing for a glass of water and fidgeting anxiously as Gaus monotones:

From the Jewish side, especially, objections have been raised which you say are partly based on misunderstandings and partly on an international political campaign. Above all, people were offended by the question raised of the extent to which Jews are to blame for their passive acceptance of the German mass murders, or to what extent the collaboration of certain Jewish councils almost constitutes a kind of guilt of their own. In any case, for a portrait of Hannah Arendt, so to speak, a number of questions come out this book. If I may begin with them: Is the criticism that your book is lacking in love for the Jewish people painful to you? (EU, 15)

Almost before Gaus has finished putting his question, Arendt bursts out angrily, ‘First of all, I must in all friendliness, state that you yourself have become a victim of this campaign...’ This is a riveting moment in which the uncomfortableness of this frank public conversation between German and Jew concerning the recent history of mass murder in Germany becomes palpable...until the discussion moves on once more, this time to the relation between love and politics.

All of the contributors to this book engage with this interview in order to join in Günter Gaus’s conversation with Hannah Arendt, so to speak. Two key themes emerge from our conversation with and about Hannah Arendt. First, almost all of the contributors take up the constellation of ideas about judgment, thinking and responsibility with which Arendt was deeply preoccupied at the

right to do so. You’re lecturing on *The Critique of Pure Reason* now and on Spinoza next semester. I’m happy about that’ (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 572; 29 October 1964).

time of the interview. An earlier phase of Arendt scholarship focused primarily on her understanding of the *vita activa*, including her conception of politics, her characterization of totalitarianism and her controversial coverage of the Eichmann trial. In recent years, Arendt scholars have begun to explore more carefully her understanding of the role of the *vita contemplativa* in a world in which political evil was perpetrated. Moving, with Arendt, from her early critique of the elevation of philosophy over politics, to a re-thinking of thinking itself, the authors in this volume probe her ideas about thinking and judgment and their relation to action, power and its attendant risk of political evil. Consistent with Arendt's own insistence that thought engage with the actual realities we face, the contributors also engage with her ideas about thinking, judgment and responsibility to deepen our understanding of the political predicaments of our own day.

For Arendt, thinking and judging were highly active faculties, albeit ones that did not carve out the same type of visible space in the public sphere. Rather, they take the conversation that constitutes the unique space of the political, between men or women, and continue it in a realm that defies the march of temporality. Much of Arendt's writing was an exercise in understanding. By entering into a conversation with the vast array of thinkers who represented Arendt's interlocutors, and thinking with (and often against) them about the world that she faced, Arendt was, as it were, finding her way into that world: not as a foreign place, but as one where she could feel at home. This conversational creation of a common world is the second dimension of her work around which the chapters in this book cohere. All contributors enter into the conversations that she was already carrying on, and which come down to us as the reification of those conversations – her written words. Some do so by making explicit the conversation that is often implicit in her work. They examine the relation between Arendt and interlocutors against the background of whose thought she was writing, such as Kant, Nietzsche, Marx, Cassirer and Camus.

While most chapters speak to both themes, this book has been organized into two sections, according to the emphasis each chapter places on one theme or the other. The first section on 'Thinking, Judging and Responsibility' begins with Michael Mack's exploration of the links between Arendt's analysis of the life of the mind and her more explicit political concerns. If Arendt looks to thinking as one of the ways in which evil can be resisted, it is not the intensity of thinking which does this moral work. Rather it is the embedded presence of others in thinking. Through a careful reading of her analysis of Eichmann's particular embodiment of thoughtlessness, Mack shows that the difference between a thinking person and a thoughtless person lies not in their intellectual acumen or effort. Rather it depends on their willingness or ability to allow thinking to be a process that engages with the perspectives of others. Consequently, even great philosophers, such as Heidegger, can fail to think in a manner that will have positive ethical or political consequences. Underpinning Arendt's analysis of both acting and thinking is the common root of plurality and natality. Where this is lacking, neither politics nor thinking are possible.

In his contribution, Max Deutscher focuses on Arendt's phenomenology of the life of the mind, which she describes in terms of the three autonomous mental activities of thinking, willing and judging. He explains how Arendt takes up and expands Kant's suggestion that judgment might provide a way of overcoming the antinomy of pure and practical reason, carving a way for judgment about right to be translated into action in the world. He uses the metaphor of Orpheus' journey to the underworld to understand the relationship between our thinking withdrawal from the world as 'underground activity' and our willing involvement in events: how 'thinking emerges in judgment'. In returning from thinking to act in the world, we must resist the temptation to 'mortify' thought by forcing it into the open. As Deutscher puts it, 'Eurydice has to vanish when Orpheus goes to look across the abyss of time, just as we must cease to dwell in the land of thought when we go to act in response to dwelling there. Even as we go to write or speak before we do what we had been thinking of, we cease to be in the mode of thinking'. The metaphor of 'thinking from underground' allows Deutscher to describe the relation between thinking, willing and judging without either collapsing one dimension of the life of the mind into the other or foreclosing all connection between them.

Rosalyn Diprose takes up Arendt's exploration of thinking and judging to examine her concept of personal responsibility. She explains how Arendt's interest in responsibility goes beyond the juridical conception that allows for the assignation of praise or blame to consider the ontological conditions for responsibility. She also draws a connection between the necessary conditions for personal responsibility and republican government, arguing with Arendt that political structures can annihilate the conditions under which individuals can develop the capacity to be responsible. More specifically, Diprose shows how Arendt's understanding of responsibility is linked with the temporalization of the self. To be responsible, individuals must be able to conceive of futurity as an open space, rather than seeing themselves as enacting the past into the future. Against Arendt, however, Diprose argues that it is the shock in the body or the body's working through the material that comes to it that allows for the self to establish its own evaluation of the world. Arendt's rigid ontological classification of the dimensions of life (*zoë* and *bios*) prevents her from taking the resources of sensibility into account in the story of how we come to conscience. Yet this sensibility should be tempered by recognition of the freedom and futurity of the other, lest the individual's expression become dominating. Thus, it is the embodied consciousness of our own futurity and the embodied futurity of others that makes responsibility possible.

Danielle Celermajer similarly explores Arendt's idiosyncratic views on responsibility, tracking Arendt's search for the conditions or qualities that allowed certain people to retain a moral compass even in the darkest of times. A commitment to the subjective experience of friendship proves most important in retaining an independent capacity for judgment and moral orientation. By friendship Arendt has in mind not an intimate space where people can take refuge from the world but rather one based on concern for the world they share. Arendt thereby articulates a critical link between a certain type of relationship between people, the world

(as a potential home) and our capacity to make judgments. Only by considering a common world that lies between us, and working out in the context of company how to make judgments about the world, can we recreate standards for judgment in the absence of external guidance. Insofar as what we care about is sharing the world with others, with friends, we are drawn to form judgments that take into consideration the perspectives of those with whom we share the world.

Marguerite La Caze also examines the question of judgment with a particular focus on the judgment of the statesperson. Arendt remarks on the similarity between the qualities that lead to good judgment in statespersons and ordinary people, but also makes clear that there are particular challenges that the former face in making judgments. In particular, they are not deciding for themselves, but for the nation. Therefore, one of the conditions of judgment that is particularly relevant for them is that they care more deeply for the world than for themselves. La Caze considers both the negative force of conscience on judgment, which prevents one from acting wrongly, and the positive force of exemplars, indicating how Arendt draws on Kant to develop her theory of judgment. But she also raises two critical points. First, she asks why conscience might not also bring us into conflict with ourselves if we fail to act under certain circumstances. Second, she questions Arendt's assumption that in judgment one gathers into oneself the views of others through an act of imagination. The danger is that one thinks one can imagine what one cannot imagine, overlooking the depth of difference in perspectives. To supplement this deficit, she suggests, leaders ought to bring the views not only of experts, but also of ordinary others into their field of vision.

According to Arendt, both mundane thoughtlessness (as characterized by Eichmann) and a certain type of intellectual thoughtfulness (as characterized by Heidegger) can be the preconditions for committing or acquiescing in evil. To make sense of this, Paul Formosa explains that, in Arendt's view, it is only a certain kind of thinking – critical thinking – that conditions against the commission of evil. At the same time, he suggests that Arendt does not ultimately break through the philosophical traditions she criticized in her early work, falling back, for example, on an old philosophical prejudice against the ordinary members of the political community. More specifically, he takes issue with her interpretation of the moral transformation that ordinary Germans underwent, arguing that it is not plausible to suggest that they simply swapped values as they would table manners. He argues for a more subtle reading of the shift in values whereby the basic mores remained and the categories of people to whom they applied altered. What is more, Formosa suggests that by locating the capacity to resist evil in the avoidance of self-contradiction, Arendt risks foreclosing the possibility of desperately needed action.

The second section on 'Conversation and Context' is opened by Ned Curthoys who locates Arendt's work directly against the thought of Ernst Cassirer, and more generally against what he identifies as a subaltern German–Jewish approach to history and philosophy. This is exemplified in Arendt's insistence that the historian enter into a conversation with history in a manner which both allows for the truth

of events and recognizes the concerns shaping its reception from the vantage point of the present. More particularly, by aligning her approach with this tradition, Curthoys underlines the importance of the liminal perspective of Jews as perpetual cultural pariahs in Germany, and the alternate routes of thought this allowed them to carve. Curthoys also uses the now infamous Cassirer/Heidegger Davos dispute to contextualize some of the shifts in Arendt's thought as they relate to her own situation as a thinker. Here, he muses over whether Arendt's relative stability in the United States in the years after the war allowed her to re-engage the modified tradition of Enlightenment that Cassirer advocated contra Heidegger. Indeed, he argues that the counter-tradition that passed through Cassirer to Arendt represents an alternative both to the monological adherence to singular truth often associated with Kantian ethics and Heidegger's dangerous alliance to the earthbound truth of the *Volks*.

Jeff Malpas explores the role of truth in Arendt's thought. In developing Arendt's communicative conception of truth, he illuminates the structural links between plurality, communication, thinking, the context of thought and the open-ended nature of truth. By insisting that propositions cannot exist outside the context of sentences, which are themselves always attached to the world as it appears, Malpas is able to de-link the notion of truth from the time-less, context-free realm. Through his exploration of Camus' similarly communicative and dialogical understanding of truth, Malpas also picks up on the argument that Diprose makes about the relational dimension of Arendt's conception of freedom. Contrary to the notion of other people as the space where the authentic self is lost, for both thinkers humanity is embedded in the engagement with others' humanity. Correlatively, just as Diprose locates the manner in which contemporary governments can undermine the conditions of responsibility by foreclosing futurity, Malpas identifies the dangerous contemporary propensity of government to undermine the conditions of critical political engagement by lying to the point where cynicism becomes normal.

Peter Murphy engages with Arendt's views on freedom, constitution and power by examining the distinct and paradoxical quality of the United States, Arendt's adopted home. Murphy considers what he calls the 'poetical creation' of the United States and argues that, far from indicating some structural weakness, its dynamic of paradoxes is what makes America powerful. Starting with Arendt's comparison between the French and American Revolutions, and the deleterious impact of necessity on the creation of a strong Republic, Murphy analyzes the trajectory of the US as a Republic born not from necessity but from the aspiration to freedom. In particular, he is interested in the ways in which the US has expanded and multiplied its realm of power through alliances that embraced differences. As Murphy depicts the United States, it is an embodiment of the living politics of continuous renewal and the refusal to entrench a particular identity or truth that Arendt advocated as the essence and uniqueness of the political.

Just as Arendt perceived violence as a distorted form of political action, so she was convinced that the satisfaction of human needs was not a properly political

concern. Rather, it was only by first liberating ourselves from necessity through labor which is oriented to the satisfaction of the needs of the body, that we are able to actualize our freedom by participating in politics as an end in itself. Consequently, a politics of need is inherently anti-political because it inevitably lacks the world-disclosive character that is, for Arendt, the defining feature of the political. Andrew Schaap contextualizes Arendt's argument about the anti-political politics of need in relation to her engagement with the Marxist tradition and the reception of her work within that tradition. Drawing on the work of Agnes Heller, Nancy Fraser and Jacques Rancière he suggests that, contrary to Arendt's reductive ontological argument, it is possible to conceptualize a politics of need that would be properly political in Arendt's sense, according to which the articulation of needs by social movements would have a world-constitutive quality.

In the concluding chapter, Vrasidas Karalis considers Arendt's (1969) essay 'On Violence' in the context of the political and intellectual milieu in which she intervened. The political context was one in which powerful social movements emerged throughout the world, confronting state power with spectacular and often also violent forms of protest. The intellectual context was one in which psychological explanations of violence came to predominate, which presupposed a natural propensity to violence in human beings, which was restrained by a veneer of civilizing social structures. Arendt, in contrast, sought to explain the violence of 1968 as a distorted form of political rationality. She therefore takes issue with the explanation of violence as a natural phenomenon, interpreting it rather as a dramatization of grievances through collective action. Yet, Karalis argues, Arendt's humanistic understanding of violence is inadequate for making sense of the political context she addressed. For it presupposes an unmediated and rational relation between thinking and acting. However, since the social crises of 1968, human acting and thinking have been mediated and therefore detached from the pursuit of rational outcomes. Arendt failed to recognize how the humanistic vocabulary she relied on was inherently conservative in the context in which she wrote since it discriminated against all oppositional forces.

The screening of Hannah Arendt's interview with Günter Gaus at symposiums held in Sydney and Melbourne in 2006 to commemorate the centenary of her birth was a highlight of both events.⁵ For many of us in attendance, who saw and heard Arendt speaking for the first time, watching the interview confirmed our respect for her as a commanding thinker. Throughout this book, we seek to engage with

5 The conference in Sydney was organized by the Sydney Society for Literature and Aesthetics (SSLA) with the generous support of the School of Languages and Cultures, the Arts Faculty and the Department of Modern Greek at the University of Sydney. We are grateful to the Goethe Foundation, the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics and the Department of Political Science at the University of Melbourne for supporting the Melbourne symposium.

Hannah Arendt as she appears in the interview (singular, passionate, embodied) in a conversation that is often critical but always productive.⁶

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